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ABSTRACT

Two samples of college student writing, paragraphs from freshman compositions, are analyzed for presence or absence of two characteristics of literate prose, decontextualization and autonomy. Writing is decontextualized and autonomous when whatever is needed for its comprehension is included in the words of the text, and comprehension is not dependent on context or verbal cues, as is often the case with speech. It is argued that the writer's failure to decontextualize is, more specifically, due to violations of the constraints of the organization of given-new information, but that in order to understand this, a new conception of this organization is needed. Two additional discourse organizing principles are identified: (1) all new information must be to some extent given, and the more given information is the more felicitous information; and (2) all discourse constituents are not constrained by equally stringent givenness conditions. Examples are offered and discussed, and these new principles are applied to the texts in question. (MSE)

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Seeking a Pedagogically Useful Understanding of Given-New: An Analysis of Native-Speaker Errors in Written Discourse

Asha Tickoo

This paper will demonstrate that at a micro-level of analysis the inexperienced writer's failure to achieve the `decontextualization' and `autonomy' (cf.Kay 1977) characteristic of literate prose manifests itself as clearly identifiable violations of the principles of information organization into given and new. To properly explain these violations, however, it is necessary to add to and amend the existing theory of given-new.

INTRODUCTION

Studies that have sought to identify the differences in information organization between spoken and written discourse[1] have referred to such broad distinctions as the context dependence and `nonautonomy' of speech versus the `decontextualization' and `autonomy' of writing (Kay 1977). Writing is said to be decontextualized and autonomous because whatever is needed for its comprehension is included in the words of the text; speech, on the other hand, relies on a `simultaneous transmission over other channels, such as paralinguistic, postural and gestural'. Because of its heavy dependence on interlocutor feedback, speech has also been described as `involved' and often `fragmented', whereas writing is typically both `detached' from audience and context and `integrated' rather than fragmented (Chafe 1982). This means that writers must "learn to initiate, sustain, and develop a written `utterance' without depending on signals of agreement, disagreement, or confusion from an addressee. And, since they cannot see the addressee to judge if they share a common background...they try to make the premises of their reasoning and the logical connections explicit so they can communicate with those who do not share their basic assumptions." (Rader, 1982:187) Referring to approximately the same typical features, Scollon & Scollon (1984) coin the term `focal situation' "for any communicative situation in which there are strong limitations on negotiation between participants" (p. 183), not merely writing per se, to contrast with an unfocused situation, which depends on active participant negotiation. And Michaels & Collins (1984), describing teacher expectations of students' in-class interaction, identify a literate prose style, as something quite distinct from "conversationally embedded narrative accounts that depend upon context and nonverbal cues for much of their cohesion.":

1. objects were to be named and described, even when they were in plain sight;
2. talk was to be explicitly grounded temporally and spatially;
3. minimal shared knowledge or context was to be assumed on the part of the audience;

4. thematic ties needed to be lexicalized if topic shifts were to be seen as motivated and relevant" (pp. 234-224)

In this study, I want to carry out a fine grained analysis of two student attempts at literate prose, paragraphs 1 and 2, both of which fail to achieve the decontextualization and autonomy, and hence the focused situation typical of a literate prose style. They are the opening paragraphs of two freshman essays commenting on the central idea of passage A, given below. Both students are white, middle class males.

A. The new sciences of sociology, psychology and psychiatry have cast aside such concepts as will, willpower, badness and laziness and replaced them with political and psychological repression, poor conditioning, diseased family interaction and bad genes. One by one, human failings have been redesignated as diseases. Remember when drugs or alcohol abuse was a product of some combination of hedonism and foolishness? Now you're an addict. You have no will, so you are not to blame; the disease got you. The fusion of capitalism and science has resulted in thousands of new experts setting up treatment programs certifying each other, publishing books and flitting from talk show to talk show. It is time to rehabilitate the concept of will and restore it to its proper place in our lives. Ultimately, we must assume responsibility for our action, and stop the promotion and exploitation of human frailties and imperfections. (Adapted from an essay by Rex Julian Beaber)

Paragraph 1. Rex Julian Beaber makes many key points[2] in his essay. Beaber states that people in today's society believe that **almost all the human race's imperfections (1)** are due to disease. He suggests that the concept of will and willpower have disappeared. These concepts have been replaced by excuses that are thought up **by an expert (2)** in the new `sciences' of sociology, psychology and psychiatry. These experts devise **ways (3)** such as treatments programs designed to make money and also try to persuade society to accept the faulty fact that people should not be held accountable for their own actions. **This, of course, is not true as Beaber agrees (4).** (From an essay by Sean F.)

Paragraph 2. Rex Julian Beaber claimed **in an essay (1)** that the concepts of willpower and responsibility for one's actions have disappeared from our society. **Instead of being blamed for our faults, Beaber feels that these faults, including drug and alcohol abuse, have been transformed into a long list of fake diseases by the mental health field. (2)** The mental health field then treats these so-called diseases to gain money and fame. (From an essay by Keith R.)

Each of the errors in paragraphs 1 and 2 is the result of a failure to treat the written utterance as an autonomous and decontextualized unit. But to properly understand the nature of these individual violations, it is necessary to appreciate the consequences of autonomy and decontextualization on the coherence constraints on

sub-units of a piece of discourse. I will demonstrate that at the micro-level of discourse analysis the failure to decontextualize is apparent as clearly identifiable violations of the constraints on the organization of given-new information. The current conception of the organization of given-new, however, is not adequate to a proper identification and explanation of these violations. Therefore, before carrying out this analysis, I will first add two basic constructs to the existing theory of given-new.

TWO UNRECOGNIZED DISCOURSE ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

The most fundamental information organizing principle states that given information precedes new information. I will show that information is constrained by two additional organizing principles:

3a: All new information must be to some extent given,
3b: and the more$_3$ given information is the more felicitous information.
4. All discourse constituents, however, are not constrained by equally stringent givenness conditions: Certain types of constructions and NPs are required to be more given than others.

These three constraints -- the given precedes new constraint together with 3 and 4 defined above -- are necessary though perhaps not sufficient for a proper explanation of the types of errors in 1 and 2.

The givenness of the new

Principle 3 is not recognized by traditional conceptions of information structure. Traditionally, constituents of discourse, at every level, were gauged for their informational status by using the dichotomous concept of given versus new. (cf. Chafe 1976, Clark 1977, Halliday 1974 & 1976, Horn 1978, Kuno 1972, 1974, 1978, 1979). This perception of constituents as either given or new is a simplification that is both inaccurate and misleading. Careful analysis shows that discourse internally both entities and propositions must be to some degree shared knowledge between speaker and interlocutor.[4] The examples of 5 illustrate the shared knowledge constraints on discourse entities.

5a: There was once an old man who lived deep inside a wood.
5b: His wife lived with him.
5c: A woman lived with him.
He lived with a woman.
5d: A man lived with him.

In the context of 5a, b is the most felicitous of b, c, and d, because `his wife' relates back to `an old man' with the shared knowledge that men may have wives. In order for the utterance of c to be felicitous in the context of 5a, one would have

to assume that the speaker was attempting to create suspense. People generally live together when they are in some way related and it is the speaker's failure to explicitly refer to this relationship that is responsible for creating suspense.

This suspense, however, only arises when the two referents are ordered so that one appears in the discourse after the other. If both the woman and the old man were introduced into the discourse in the same initial utterance, as in `An old man and a woman lived inside the woods.', there would be no suspense, which implies that the suspense is not in fact the result of the simple fact that cohabiting men and women are related by some shared knowledge relationship which has not been explicitly stated.

When the referents are both new and their appearance in the discourse is ordered, a concomitant of this ordering is that there must be a shared knowledge relationship between them such that the second referent becomes to some degree given in the discourse as a result of the relationship it bears to the preceding one. The motivation for placing one new entity after another new entity, as opposed to introducing them in the discourse in the same initial utterance, is that the speaker is able to make the second less new by defining it in terms of its shared knowledge relationship to the preceding entity. The interlocutor, therefore, interprets ordering of new entities as being indicative of a shared knowledge relationship between them, and if this relationship is neither self-evident, nor explicitly referred to, he assumes that it is forthcoming at some later point in the discourse.

It is necessary, however, to determine when it is feasible to assume that the shared knowledge relationship is being intentionally withheld, as in 5c, with respect to 5a, rather than assuming that the ordering is, in the absence of the shared knowledge relationship, simply infelicitous, as is the case in d with respect to 5a. Example 6 is useful in arriving at an understanding of this:

6a: There was once a dog who lived deep inside a wood.
6b: A dog lived with him.

The oddness of 6b in the context of 6a shows that women living with men, which is the case in 5a and 5c, differentiating it from men living with men of 5a and 5d, is not responsible for the difference in acceptability of 5c and 5d with respect to 5a. What is relevant is whether it is entities belonging to the same set or entities belonging to different sets that are ordered in the discourse. When they are members of the same set, as in 5a and 5d, they ought to be introduced together in the same initial utterance, because there is no possibility of the existence of a relationship of dependence between them through which one entity can become less new by being defined in terms of a shared knowledge relationship to the other. So that the most natural expression of 6a and b is `Two dogs lived inside the woods.', and that of 5a and 5d `Two men lived inside the woods.' When the referents are not members of the same set, but are related through shared knowledge, their appearance in the discourse can be ordered such that the dependent referent -- one which is defined in terms of its shared knowledge relationship to the other -- appears after the defining referent -- the one to which the shared knowledge relationhip is made.

The shared knowledge conditions on new entities are further exemplified in the clauses of 7:

7a. I am going to Philip's wedding tomorrow.
7b: Tom is coming with me.
7c: My date/boy friend is coming with me.
7d: A man is coming with me.
7e: A man I know is coming with me.

7b after 7a is felicitous if the referent of the subject noun is known to both speaker and interlocutor. Here the ordering is not a concomitant of a shared knowledge relationship of dependence of `Tom' of 7b to the `I' of 7a. `Tom' is known to both speaker and interlocutor but is newly introduced into the discourse. The new entity of 7c, however, bears a relationship of dependence to the known entity of 7a, since it is shared knowledge that women may have boy friends/dates. 7d after 7a is less natural than 7c after 7a because there is no shared knowledge about the referent of the subject noun: It is not definable in terms of a relationship of dependence to the known entity of 7a, nor is it shared knowledge but newly introduced into the discourse. But 7e, in which the same indefinite reference is what Prince refers to as `anchored' (Prince 1981:236), is by this means, made felicitous. Anchoring makes explicit the relationship of dependence to the preceding, already given entity. This is done in 7e by the speaker relating `the man' to the preceding known entity, the speaker herself.

Like discourse internal NPs, all discourse internal propositions are also required to be to some degree given, and as with NPs the more given proposition is also the more felicitous proposition. This is demonstrated by the clauses in 8:

8a: We got home at five.
8b: Then we took the children to the moon.
8c: Then we took the children to the pub.
8d: Then we took the children to the park.

The less shared knowledge there is to support the sequencing of each of the acts of 8b, 8c, and 8d, individually, to the act of 8a, the less felicitous this sequencing is. Therefore, while b is bizarre, and c unlikely, d is perfectly felicitous, simply because it is shared knowledge that after coming home one may take the children to the park, would not take them to the pub, and could not take them to the moon.

The shared knowledge constraints on new propositions are illustrated in 9:

9a: She was fine until then.
9b: She had a splitting head ache.
9c: She was eating heartily and chatting away.

It is the failure to match our shared knowledge of the state of people in good health that makes b infelicitous as a statement in support of 9a; while c, which conforms to these shared assumptions is, for this reason, felicitous.

Canonical order, marked order and coherent propositions

Thus far, we have shown that principle 3 holds both for NPs and clausal propositions: Discourse internally both NPs and clausal propositions must be to some extent given and the more given NP or proposition is the more felicitous NP or proposition. While it is

clear, therefore, that there is a restriction on how new *new* information can be; it is also possible to show that there is an upper limit on how given it can be, and it is within the constraints set by this upper limit that more given information is more felicitous information. Violation of this maximal level of givenness will make a proposition that is highly given, relative to its preceding discourse, nevertheless incoherent in the context of this discourse. There is therefore what amounts to a bi-directional control on the givenness of new information, constraining it to be neither too given nor too new, and ruling out clauses such as 10b and 10c as incoherent in the context of 10a; 10b because all propositions must be somewhat given, and 10c because they must not be so given as to repeat from the preceding discourse or state what is presupposed by it:

10a: I like all nuts
10b: # and I'm going around the world.
10c: # and I like cashews.

There is, that is, a condition of coherent givenness, constraining new information to be more rather than less given, but at the same time not so given as to repeat the preceding discourse or state what is presupposed by it.

Governed by this broad constraint to be coherently given, the propositions of canonically ordered clauses can add to the preceding discourse in any of a number of ways, but any marked construction is constrained to code a proper subset of the total set of given relationships. In what follows, I will briefly describe four clausal relationships that canonical order can bear to its preceding discourse, and also demonstrate that unlike canonical order, a marked construction which can bear any one of these four relationships is constrained to bearing just that one and no other.

To assess the nature of these four clausal relationships, it is necessary to recognize that a significant part of the information that clauses convey about the event or state they denote is communicated through the clausal propositional content and the clausal aspect. The different clausal relationships to the preceding discourse are then determined by gauging at one and the same time both the givenness of the propositional content and the givenness of the aspect of the clause, at the time of its utterance and in the context of its preceding discourse.

Prince (1981) defines three levels of givenness, namely,

1. **predictable/recoverable given**: "The speaker assumes that the hearer can predict or could have predicted that a particular item will or would have occurred in a particular position within a sentence" (Prince 1981:226),
2. **salient given** (I have sometimes used the term 'presupposed' with meaning equivalent to salient given): "The speaker assumes that the hearer has or

could appropriately have some particular thing/entity ... in his/her consciousness at the time of hearing the utterance" (Prince 1981:228), and

3. **shared knowledge given**: "The speaker assumes, or can infer a particular thing (but is not necessarily thinking about it)." (Prince 1981:230)

Using these levels of givenness to evaluate clausal propositional and aspectual givenness, I have identified the following four types of clausal relationship to the preceding discourse:

Category 1, exemplified by 11b, is a relationship in which both the propositional content and the aspect of the clause are shared knowledge given at the time of the utterance of the clause.

11a: Until about five o'clock Mary was fine.
11b: She had eaten heartily.
11c: Shared knowledge to 11a: Mary had been doing things that people do when they are in good health.

It is shared knowledge at the time of the utterance of 11b that Mary had been doing things that people do when they are in good health. 11b is an instance of this shared knowledge, and is constrained both by its propositional content and its aspect. The aspectual constraint is concomitant with the constraint on the proposition, and this is evident in the fact that, `She will eat heartily', for example, cannot be an instance of 11c.

A second clausal relationship is exemplified in 12b, in which the aspect is shared knowledge, while the propositional content is new.

12a: Mary got home at five(.)
12b: (Then/At 5:30 she took the children to the park.)/
She took the children to the park at 5:30.
12c: and took the children to the park.

In the third clausal relationship, exemplified in 13b, both the aspect and the propositional content are salient given.

13a: The Johnsons had a baby.
13b: (Tom they called him.)/ They called him Tom.
13c: # Then they called him Tom.
13d: # They gave him a name.

It is salient given at the time of the utterance of 13b both that people name their new born infants and that the naming follows the event of having the baby. 13b is, therefore, salient given both for propositional content and for aspect.

And finally in the last clausal relationship, exemplified in 14b, the aspect is salient given, while the propositional content is new.

14a: I left for class at 9:30(.)
14b: (and arrived in the nick of time.)/ I arrived in the nick of time.
14c: # and then I arrived in the nick of time.

At the time of the utterance of 14b it is salient given that one of a set of actions that can occur after 14a will do so. That is, the aspect of 14b is salient given.

We have demonstrated in the above discussion that clauses in canonical order can relate to the preceding discourse in any one of the above-described four ways. By doing this we have also shown that canonical order does not code any of these relationships.[5]

The propositions of marked constructions while they are, of course, also constrained to be coherently given, differ from clauses in canonical order in two ways: 1) They select a proper subset of the total number of coherent ways to be given. And 2) they formally code this selection so that the construction cannot be used to felicitously make any other type of relationship to the preceding discourse. For example, the clause with an initial temporal adverb in 12b marks the relationship which has shared knowledge aspect and new propositional content, the direct object preposing of 13b codes the relationship with salient propositional content and salient aspect, and the VP conjunction of 14b codes the relationship with salient aspect and new propositional content. Because these constructions code the relationships they bear to their preceding discourse, it is not possible to replace any one of them with any other of comparable meaning. For example, one cannot replace the clause of 12b, with initial adverb, with a clause of comparable meaning that is VP conjoined as in 12c and retain the pragmatic force of 12b. The temporal relationship of 12b implies that it was possible at the time of the utterance of 12b that Mary would do something after she got home and that this possible following act was felicitously instanced by her taking the children to the park. If we remove the initial temporal adverb from 12b, however, it is suggested not that it was possible that she would do something after she got home, but that it was inevitable. And `taking the children to the park' rather than being a felicitous instance of a plausible following act, becomes a felicitous instance of an act that inevitably follows.

The constraints on the givenness on all constructions are therefore not the same. Neither are the constraints on the givenness on all NPs the same. For example, objects of prepositions are required to be more given than other discourse internal NPs. This is demonstrated by the clauses of 15 and 16:

15a: There is a **table** against the door.
15b: I pushed a **table** up against the door.
15c: I put a bottle of wine **on a table**.
15d: I put a bottle of wine **on a table against the door**.
15e: I put a bottle of wine **on her table**.

16a: Aunt Sally has a **dog**.
16b: I saw aunt Sally **with a dog**.
16c: I saw aunt Sally **with a dog I sometimes walk in the park**.
16d: I saw aunt Sally **with her dog**.

15a and b and 16a demonstrate that NPs can be new when they are not objects of prepositions. 15c, d and e, and 16b, c, and d demonstrate that NPs which can otherwise be new must be `anchored' when they are objects of a preposition, and further that objects of prepositions become more felicitous the more anchored they are.

VIOLATING THE PRINCIPLES OF GIVEN-NEW ORGANIZATION

The above discussion has been an attempt to show that, in addition to the fundamental information organizing constraint that given precedes new, there exist two other organizing principles: 3a) All new information is to some extent given and 3b) more given information is more felicitous as long as it does not repeat, or state what is presupposed by, the preceding discourse. Further, 4) certain constructions and NPs are required to be both more given than others and given in highly specified ways. I will now attempt to explain the errors in paragraphs 1 and 2 in terms of violations of these principles.

Teachers usually suggest that the denotational ability of a referential phrase such as `almost all the human race's imperfections' in 1, in paragraph 1, can be improved by making it more descriptively specific. The question for most students then is how does one arrive at a more specific form of reference. My suggestion is that 1 is a violation of principle 1. The NP the human race's imperfections' is not a sufficiently given form of reference to problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, discussed in passage A, to effectively denote them. The more given it is made, the more successful it is as denotation. This is demonstrated in 1a.

1a. R. J. Beaber states that people in today's society believe that all moral failings and character flaws are due to disease.

In 2, the NP `an expert' refers to a particular expert, whereas it is clear that Sean intends its reference to be generic. Its inability to denote the generic class of experts is, of course, not because indefinite reference has to be nongeneric, as is evident in 2a, where the NP `an expert' need be no particular expert, but can represent the generic class. It is as NP of a by phrase, in 2, that it is constrained to refer to a specific expert. As NP of a by phrase, the referent is interpreted as given information, and as such points to a particular expert. The requirement that NPs of a by phrase, and more generally of any prepositional phrase, are constrained to be more rather than less given is a consequence of principle 2, and is illustrated in 2b, 2c and 2d. In 2b the clause is felicitous when Mary is shared knowledge between speaker and interlocutor. 2c is odd because the NP of the by phrase is not given information. The same NP becomes more felicitous when it is anchored as in 2d. As a result of the constraint that it be interpreted as given information after a by phrase, indefinite reference can only be interpreted nongenerically. To avoid this happening, it is necessary to use the plural form of the noun `experts' as in 2e.

2a. An expert in the new sciences of sociology, psychology and psychiatry says addiction is not a consequence of irresponsible behaviour but of

disease, and people no longer feel that they need to exercise will power, discipline and self control to overcome their problems.

2b. The cake was baked by Mary.

2c. The cake was baked by a woman.

2d. The cake was baked by a woman I know and admire.

2e. These concepts have been replaced by excuses that are thought up by experts in the new sciences of Sociology, Psychology and Psychiatry.

In 3, the use of the word `ways' is infelicitous because it is used as though it has definite reference, whereas words like `way', `method' and `strategy' cannot have definite reference. As a consequence, they cannot stand on their own when they are newly introduced into the discourse, i.e., it is necessary to make the referent explicit in phrases such as `a way to do x', or `a method by which x is done'. The word `strategy' can stand on its own when it refers to something given in the preceding discourse, as in 3a:

3a: Sean thought up the perfect way of handling the problem and adopted this strategy/# way whenever occasion called for it.

But `way' doesn't seem to be able to do this. (This is also demonstrated in 3a). Sean is unfamiliar with the constraints on the referentiality of the word `way'. This is a word which cannot have definite reference and also cannot refer to something given in the preceding discourse.

Finally in 4, egocentric Sean is assuming that his own views rather than Beaber's are given information between Sean and the reader, and he therefore refers to Beaber as being in agreement with him, whereas it is Beaber's views that are in fact given information, and it would be appropriate for Sean to indicate that he agrees with Beaber. Again, there is a failure, at a very basic level, to properly gauge givenness and conform to accepted principles of given-new organization.

There are several problems with 1 of paragraph 2. First the indefinite reference implies that, contrary to fact, the reader is not familiar with the essay in question. If we assume that this is a deliberate stylistic tactic that Keith has chosen to adopt, we are still left with two problems both of which are addressed by rephrasing this first sentence as in 1a:

1a: In an essay written by R. J. Beaber, the author ...

In 1, the object of the preposition is anchored by the accompanying participial phrase and is therefore more given than its counterpart in 1. By principle 4, objects of prepositions are required to be more given than other types of NPs.

1b: He read an essay./He wrote an essay.

1c: He read an essay by Rex Julian Beaber.

1d: I read in an essay by some 18 novelists that ...

1e: ? I read in an essay that ....

As we have already shown more than once, NPs which can otherwise be new (1b) must be anchored when they are objects of a preposition, as is demonstrated by the felicity of 1d and the infelicity of 1e. So it is the anchoring by the participial phrase that accounts for the greater felicity of the object of preposition in 1a. 1a is also an improvement on Keith's first sentence because it has appropriate left to right distribution of given and new information, while Keith's sentence fails to conform to the given precedes new constraint.

The adverbial clause in 2, sets two constraints on the following matrix clause: 1) the arguments (of the verb of the adverbial clause) must be maintained in the matrix clause with the same semantic roles that they possess in the adverbial clause. 2) The proposition of the matrix clause must bear a salient relationship of alternation to the proposition of the adverb clause. Because of these two constraints the reader anticipates a matrix clause which is informationally packaged as in 2a and 2b, in which the arguments of the adverbial construction are in fact maintained in the matrix construction with the semantic role they possess in the adverb clause and the proposition bears a salient relationship of alternation to the proposition of the adverbial clause.

2. Instead of being blamed for our faults,
2a. we are praised for them.
2b. we are encouraged to cultivate them.

To represent the information that Keith intends to communicate in the matrix clause of 2 so that it conforms to constraints 1) and 2) set by the preceding adverbial clause, it would have to take the form of 2c or 2d, in which, as in 2a and 2b, the arguments (of the verb) of the adverbial clause are maintained in the matrix clause with the semantic role they possess in the adverbial clause, and the proposition bears a salient relationship of alternation to the proposition of the adverbial clause:

2c. we have been told that these faults (- our addiction to drugs and alcohol) are the result of disease.
2d. doctors have told us that these faults (- our addiction to drugs and alcohol) are the result of disease.

The matrix clause of 2 violates constraints 1) and 2) and therefore reader expectations by changing the semantic roles of the arguments relative to those they possess in the adverbial clause. In Keith's passive construction `drugs' becomes subject of the passive. In addition, although one can, as we have done above, construct a salient relationship of alternation from the propositional content of the matrix clause of 2, given our knowledge of passage A, the proposition of 2, namely, `transforming our faults into a list of diseases' does not as it stands readily lend itself to interpretation as a relationship of alternation to the proposition of the adverbial construction, namely `blaming us for our faults'.

In the context of the adverbial clause of 2, the matrix clause is required to be both highly given and given in a very specific way. And this context is appropriate

for the use of the passive construction. As we have demonstrated in our discussion of principle 4, the contexts in which it is appropriate to use marked constructions call for information that is highly given and set strict constriants on the manner in which this information must be given. It is in contexts where a marked construction could felicitously occur that students most often violate the informational constraints on whole constructions, very likely because the givenness constraints are so highly specific in such contexts.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that student errors in discursive prose, which previous scholars have referred to in such broad terms as a failure to decontextualize, can be identified as violations of specific principles of given-new organization, and have attempted to add to the descriptive adequacy of the existing theory of given-new to better account for these violations.

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NOTES

[1]This is a differentiation which has recently been reinterpreted as more rightly distinguishing formal from informal discourse, rather than speech and writing per se (cf. Beaman 1984).

[2]There seems to be a collocation problem with `many' and `key' in the NP `many key points', which becomes more apparent if we substitute `central' or `main' for `key', as in `many central points' and `many main points'. This is because the words `key', `central' and `main' refer to a unique referent or set of referents, whereas `many' appears to imply nonuniqueness. The problem is solved by substituting, for example, `the following' for `many', as in `the following key points', since this preserves the uniqueness implicit in `key'. This particular error is not insightfully explained in terms of the organization of given-new information.

[3]3b is an extension of Prince's 1981 claim that discourse internally the more given NP is the more felicitous NP. She sees this as a condition on NPs alone, whereas there is reason to believe that it is a general constraint applying to all units of discourse.

[4]Only in discourse initial utterances is the constraint on new discourse less apparent, though there are constraints on the type of new that can be discourse initial. One is unlikely to start a conversation with something which, while it may be the crux of what one wishes to say, is nevertheless startlingly new when unprefaced with some more anticipated and conventional opening. For example, one is unlikely to open a conversation with the utterance `A man got run over by a bus.'

[5]Further evidence for this is independently provided by the fact that a clause internal temporal adverb cannot be deictic, although it can be interpreted as being deictic in the discourse context in which it occurs when it is not inherently deictic. This is because an inherently deictic temporal adverb, as in 1b below, codes a clausal relationship to the preceding clause, while canonical order does not do this:

1a. We got home at five.
1b. # We took the children to the zoo then.
1c. Then we took the children to the zoo.
1d. We took the children to the zoo at five thirty.
1e. At five thirty we took the children to the zoo.

In clause initial position in c, the deictic temporal adverb is felicitous in correlation with the fact that preposing word order-wise marks the structure as bonded to/looking back to the preceding discourse. In 1d, the clause final adverb is felicitous because it is not inherently deictic, but can be interpreted as being deictic in an appropriate context; and this correlates with the fact that canonical order, though it does not code any coherent relationship to the preceding discourse, can be interpreted as relating back.

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